



Underground Railroad



Illustration, copyright Jerry Pickney

At Alexandria, I crossed the Potomac River (sic) and came to Washington, where I made friends with a colored family, with whom I rested eight days. I then took the Montgomery road (sic), but, wishing to escape (illegible) and it being cloudy, I lost my course, and fell back again along the Potomac River, and traveled on the towpath of the canal from Friday night until Sunday morning.... (After an unsettling encounter with a man on horseback) I soon entered a colored person's house on the side of the canal, where they gave me breakfast and treated me very kindly. I traveled on through Williamsport and Hagerstown, in Maryland, and, on the nineteenth day of July, about two hours before day, I crossed the line into Pennsylvania with a heart full of gratitude to God, believing that I was indeed a free man, and that now, under the protection of law, there was 'none who could molest me or make me afraid.'

James Curry from Person County, NC

The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was neither “underground” nor a “railroad,” but a loose network of people and places aiding enslaved Africans to freedom. Some 100,000 enslaved persons escaped the brutal chains of slavery in the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War. The Underground Railroad has been described as America’s first civil rights movement—the first social justice movement in this country to rally the races together.

Exploring the Underground Railroad in the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail Corridor

The corridor designated by Congress for the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail is commonly associated with the travels of George Washington, with the conservation of rivers and special places, and with the Civil War. The corridor’s lesser-known themes—the Underground Railroad among these—are equally significant.

The Trail corridor includes areas within the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania that were once known as “free” and “slave” states at a time when the United States was embroiled in the institution of chattel slavery. Maryland and Virginia—important “slave states”—gave birth to the District of Columbia as the site of our Nation’s capital in 1800, while Pennsylvania was a “free state” and greatly sought by the enslaved.

With many features of the Potomac riverscape hidden from view, the many creeks, points, and lookouts presented an opportunity for freedom to the enslaved. While researchers believe that the Trail corridor is rich in such historical information, attention to the use of the waterways as a means of escaping the oppression of slavery has received only minor attention. Research has shown, however, that the enslaved used absolutely any and all measures to free themselves, and the Potomac River was a part of such efforts:

The Potomac is both deep enough for boats to cross and shallow enough, in places, for crossing on horseback or by wagon.

The most popular and well-documented escape attempt from the Nation’s capital occurred on April 15, 1848, when 77 enslaved persons fled their quarters in Washington City, Georgetown, and Alexandria. Waiting to aid them to freedom was a 54-ton bay-craft schooner called *The Pearl*. Docked at a secluded spot along the southwest wharf, the plan was to sail *The Pearl* and it’s freedom seekers southward on the Potomac River to the Chesapeake Bay, then up the bay to the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal and on to Philadelphia. This, the largest single escape attempt in United States history, was thwarted by a number of uncontrollable circumstances.

First, the schooner was spotted and noted as suspicious by a captain of a steamer headed to Washington’s port, who reported the schooner’s movement. Second, as soon as the schooner reached the mouth of the Potomac a severe storm prevented access to the Chesapeake Bay. And then after having traveled more than 100 miles *The Pearl* was forced to seek refuge from the storm and dropped anchor in a small cove called Cornfield Harbor.

Back in the Nation’s capital, enslavers were incensed upon learning that their “slaves” had escaped. Quickly a posse was formed of about 34 well-armed men, and the Dodge family of Georgetown donated the use of their steamboat *The Salem* for the mission. Within hours *The Pearl* was spotted where it had anchored and overtaken by the angry posse. The vessel and its passengers were towed back to Washington, where a mob had already assembled.

The Pearl is just one example of the use of the Potomac River as an Underground Railroad route to freedom. During the 1830s and continuing late into the next decade, Washington, D.C., operated one of the most aggressive networks because of its location and its artful leadership (C. Peter Ripley, p. 58). John Brown’s raid, beginning at the Kennedy Farmhouse and ending at Harpers Ferry, symbolizes a turning point in the enslaved African’s struggle for freedom.

In addition to the escape route of *The Pearl*, places in the Trail corridor associated with the Underground Railroad include the following:



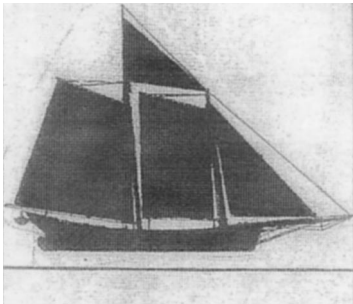
Daniel Drayton (left), hired by abolitionists to captain *The Pearl*

The Edmondson sisters, the most celebrated escapees on *The Pearl*

- Sotterley Plantation* and Camp Stanton* in southern Md.
- Alexandria Freedman’s Cemetery,* Bruins Slave Jail* and Gadsby’s Tavern* in Alexandria, Vir.
- Frederick Douglass National Historic Site*, Asbury Methodist Church* Blanche K. Bruce burial site* in Woodlawn Cemetery, Mt. Zion United Methodist Church and Female Union Band Society cemeteries in Washington, D.C.
- Arlington House* in Arlington, Vir.
- Ferry Hill Plantation* (Chesapeake and Ohio Canal N.H.P.) near Sharpsburg and Kennedy Farmhouse* in Samples Manor, both in Md.
- Harpers Ferry National Historical Park* in W. Vir, Md. and Vir.
- F. Julius LeMoyne House in Washington, Penn.

* denotes recognition by the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

Text by Alice K. Thomas



A sketch depicting the design of *The Pearl*, a schooner

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program provides assistance to organizations that are attempting to identify, document, preserve, and interpret sites, approximate travel routes and landscapes related to the Underground Railroad, or that are developing or operating interpretive and educational programs and facilities. The Program seeks to demonstrate the

significance of the people, places, and objects associated with the Underground Railroad and the Abolitionist Movement. For assistance with research on the Underground Railroad and to nominate sites, programs or facilities as components of the Network, contact one of the offices listed in this folder.

More Information

National Park Service
National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program
<http://www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr/>
(includes an explanation of the Network; recommendations for further reading; a list of sites, facilities, and programs in the Network; opportunities for assistance; and more)

Regional Coordinators:
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National Capital Region Northeast Region
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Catoctin Center for Regional Studies*
Frederick Community College
Frederick, Maryland
301-624-2703
<http://catoctincenter.frederick.edu/>

Alexandria Archeology Museum*
Alexandria, Virginia
703-838-4399
<http://oha.ci.alexandria.va.us/archaeology/>

Thomas Balch Library*
Leesburg, Virginia
703-737-7195
www.leesburgva.org/town_services/thomas_balch.cfm

Underground Railroad Experience in Maryland*
Montgomery County Department of Park & Planning
301-563-3400
www.montgomeryparksfnd.org/fg-oakcab.htm

Southern Maryland Studies Center*
Charles County Community College
La Plata, Maryland
301-870-3008 x7110
www.csm.cc.md.us/library/smsc

Pennsylvania State Archives*
717-783-3281
www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam

Maryland State Archives*
800-235-4045
www.mdarchives.state.md.us/

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Produced by the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail Office, National Park Service. For more information on Trail-related activities, see www.nps.gov/pohe or contact the Trail coordinator at phnst@nps.gov or 304-535-4014.